

Do We Unknowingly Judge Those Who Succumb to Cancer?

Facing any type of illness is difficult. For those who battle cancer, this road can be scary, challenging and long, both physically and emotionally. It can also be a trial spiritually, bringing about feelings of doubt, fear, anger and abandonment.

There are many dynamics at play for someone battling cancer. One thing that does not need to be part of the equation is judgement from those in the church. It is our responsibility as a faith community to lift them up and offer encouragement throughout this challenging time.

While it is difficult to believe that anyone would disparage someone battling a deadly disease, believing that the suffering and succumbing to the disease is their fault, it does happen. Whether through intentional attacks or unintentional advice, there are many who further complicate an already arduous journey.

Have a Little Faith

The most common spiritual advice offered is to “just have faith. God will heal those who have the faith of only a mustard seed!” It seems hopeful and simple enough. But in fact, one simply believing in God’s ability to heal does not necessarily always end as hoped for.

This seemingly helpful advice can turn damaging due to the incorrect theological position of merely needing to have enough faith in all situations. In many cases, this position is maintained by individuals who have never been challenged with a life-threatening illness such as cancer.

“Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you

will not be condemned. Forgive, and you shall be forgiven'" (Luke 6:37).

Spiritual pride concerning the belief of absolute understanding and insight to what, when, and how God does things is the basis for this position. We must work to keep our overzealous hopes and encouragement in check and offer the hope that what is guaranteed is that God will never leave or forsake us.

The Story of Job

Another common misconception about healing is that we must be blameless in the eyes of God in order to receive His aid. This "blame" can include everything from needing to offer forgiveness to another, jealousy or any other sin you are holding onto. But God does not withhold His blessings of healing circumstantially based on our goodness.

Take the story of Job. The Bible states that Job was blameless in God's eyes (Job 1:8), yet God allowed everything to be taken from him. We do not receive rewards on earth based upon our goodness. God chooses to use us in various situations and it is up to us as to how we respond in those situations.

Healing can and does come from God here on earth. Yet, healing can and also comes from God apart from this earth and it is not for us to determine how and why these ways are chosen.

Shouldn't churches include in their dogma that there may be no explanation, spiritual or otherwise, for why, how or when someone dies? Not one of us on earth is qualified to speak for God and His reasoning.

As Jesus passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But

it happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him (John 9:1-3).

A question that cannot be answered within these streams of belief is how nonbelievers and those whose lives are seemingly full of sin receive healing from an illness. There simply is no formula to guarantee earthly healing.

Supporting and encouraging the members of our congregation shows them more of God and His grace and mercy than trying to speak for Him. Encouraging them to be open to how God intends to use them can offer practical hope and purpose in their journey.

The Loved Ones Left Behind

Unfortunately, spiritual damage may befall loved ones who feel condemnation by their faith community who suggest that their loved ones did not possess enough faith. They may also feel the blame has been transferred to them.

The judgment felt may morph into resentment or anger toward God at the unfair realization that some who do not serve God survived their cancer diagnosis.

The enduring damage caused through inaccurate statements and theology, even if well-meaning, can have lasting effects through family generations.

We need to be prayerful and thoughtful in our dialogue and advice to cancer patients and their loved ones. In most cases, no one fights to live more than they do. When pressure is placed solely on their shoulders, the obstacles to healing can appear insurmountable. Instead of deliverers of stress, strife and scarring, let us be faithful stewards of God's grace, mercy and hope during these challenging times.

For more guidance on how to help minister to cancer patients and caregivers, join the Ministry Leader's Network, a part of

the Our Journey of Hope® cancer care ministry. The network offers free resources and tips on how to best serve those dealing with cancer in your congregation and your community. Or contact Rev. Percy McCray, National Director of Faith-based Programs at Cancer Treatment Centers of America, at @. {eoa}

*A fully ordained minister for more than 20 years, **Rev. Percy McCray** is a member of the United States Chaplains Association. He has been recognized as one of the “most influential African Americans in Lake County (IL)” by the People’s Voice newspaper for his religious and leadership roles within the community as well as one of the most beloved Pastors of the Chicagoland area by the Defender newspaper. In addition to his role as National Director of Faith-Based Programs at CTCA®, Rev. McCray leads Our Journey of Hope®, a cancer ministry training and support program.*